

Book Review

The Failure of Political Islam

Olivier Roy Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, xi + 238 pp.

Olivier Roy, a researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, wrote *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (1985) and coauthored, with Andre Brigot, *War in Afghanistan* (1985). Roy seems to have earned the respect of Western policy makers by making successful predictions about the war in Afghanistan. Publication of his present work within two years of its original publication by a leading American university is a reflection of this. In the present work, translated by Carol Bolk, he has undertaken a general work on Islam and politics in contemporary times and has made another courageous prediction: "Any Islamist political victory in a Muslim country would produce only superficial changes and law" (p. ix).

Roy writes in the context of a historical situation that "many consider an era of an Islamic threat" (p. 1) but does not identify the nature of this threat. What is this threat and to whom is it directed? From some of his

remarks, it seems that the threat is directed toward Western civilization, in general, and our contemporary nation-state system, in particular. His assurance to those who take the "Islamic threat" seriously is that the nation-state framework continues (and perhaps will continue) to be the determining factor because "the UN has globalized Muslim states." Despite its rhetoric, even revolutionary Iran has become just another nation-state and "the FIS's Algeria will do nothing more than place a chador over the FLN's Algeria" (p. 60), counsels Roy.

The author is a firm believer in the Enlightenment tradition of Western Europe. This tradition, he believes, is progressive, secular, and eases moral codes. Parliamentary democracy, economic development, and political modernity are some of its fundamental characteristics. This tradition has invented "a true universalist culture." Roy also believes that "the invention of modernity lies in the emergence of an autonomous political space, separate from both the religious and private spheres and embodied in the modern, law-based state. Secularity and politics are born of a closing in of Christian thought onto itself" (p. 8). His confidence in social science methodology seems almost equivalent to divine belief: He believes that in the human sciences, "the methods of learning about reality are ultimately richer than the reality" (p. 99). He seems to subscribe to the idea that the attainment of a universal man/woman through objective foundations of social science methodology is possible.

Based on this worldview, Roy analyzes the history of contemporary Muslim nation-states, particularly of "Islamists" and "neofundamentalists." He identifies the Ikhwān al Muslimīn in the Arab world and the Jama'at-i-Islami in the South Asian subcontinent, as well as other similar groups and parties, as Islamist. In the 1980s, the Islamists turned to neofundamentalism and began to work on the grass-roots level in the form of the FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) in Algeria and splinter Ikhwān groups in other Arab countries. The difference between Islamists and neofundamentalists is that among the former, Islamization occurs "from the top down," while among the latter it occurs "from the bottom up" (p. 24).

Roy does not have a high opinion of Islamists. According to him, they are urban dwellers and products of the modern educational system who have been recruited more from engineering than philosophy backgrounds. "Exact sciences, not human sciences, fascinate the Islamist, precisely because the human sciences are a deconstruction of a total Man, of Man in general, to which the exact sciences makes no pretension." It is unclear why Roy prefers man with a capital M.

Islamists have produced *lumpenintelligentsia* who have failed to translate Islamic concepts of *shūrā* into concrete political institutions. They are anticolonial, against foreign banks, night clubs, and pro-Western governments. Roy makes contradictory statements about their popularity: Although he thinks they believe in Islamization from the top down, he observes that they took advantage of the existing popular religiosity that had been exploited (rather poorly) by the ulama. In general terms, Islamists

have failed in their experiments in modern fields. Islamic investment companies established by Ḥasan al Bannā failed to survive the political crisis of 1948, zakat administration in Pakistan has failed in effective distribution, and Islamic banks are just a marketing tool rather than a scheme for a new economic order.

As Islamists turned to neofundamentalism, intellectual research, which was already deficient in the Islamist movement, was replaced by a reliance on faith alone. They no longer demanded the right to *ijtihād*, and their literature for sale became a mere collection of defensive brochures. According to him, "the degradation of Islamism into neofundamentalism has allowed it to penetrate milieus that were previously unwilling to accept its approach, in particular those of popular Islam and *sufī* brotherhoods" (p. 87). In the Rushdie affair, for example, Jama'at-i-Islami, Deobandi, and Brelvi groups in Pakistan were united in opposition.

However, the author's main concern is the effectiveness of modern nation-states. Muslim societies have failed to integrate the new lower-middle class graduates of the mass educational system with a differentiated trade or professional status. Therefore, "the state has no means by which it can control the new Islamist intellectual in his social function . . . for the state, better a Marxist university professor than a sermonizing, vagabond new intellectual" (p. 95). According to Roy, the Saudi government established the Muslim World League (*Rābiṭah al A'lām al Islāmī*) in order to control and manipulate Islamist activities. His observation is interesting: "this network allows the new intellectual elite to find easy funding for any discourse that bolsters Islam, any program of Islamization, any rereading of science or of history in Islamic terms; plagiarism and pirating of other texts are frequent" (p. 106).

Many Muslim governments have turned toward Islam in order to satisfy local Islamists. Many governments that used to refer to Arab socialism, nationalism, or secularism now lay claim to Islam, and more religious programs are given time in the state-controlled media. Yet, their achievements remain insignificant. Universities in the Muslim world insist on memorization, and obligatory teaching manuals for religion give only the Muslim viewpoint. As for Islamists and neofundamentalists, they have not been able to offer the Muslim masses a concrete political expression for their anticolonialism. Despite its references to the Muslim *ummah*, Algeria's FIS remained a nationalist movement, and the "nation-state framework continues to be the determining one" (p. 129).

Olivier Roy is also a follower of traditional Orientalism, a discipline that originated in colonial Europe with the mission of assisting and maintaining European domination over Muslim countries. Like traditional Orientalists, Roy thinks women lived in a subhuman condition in Muslim society and that only Islamists saw "women as people, and no longer as mere instruments of pleasure and reproduction" (p. 58). Islamists, he claims, have designated specific areas for women in mosques and public places. He also fails to identify the Muslim *ummah* as a law-based com-

munity. Following the same tradition, Roy blames Islamists for being anti-Copt in Egypt without considering the Coptic connection to the colonial administration in Egypt¹ and blames Islamist theoreticians for romanticizing Islamic history: "for Islamist theoreticians, Islam has no history, ummah has no divisions, man has no unconscious." However, he does not support these allegations with evidence. On the accusation of plagiarism, the author produces no documentation. In fact, Roy wants to impose his understanding of Islamization on the Islamists, for he says that "the financial system (in Iran) has barely been Islamized, for example, Christians are not subject to a poll tax" (p. 139).² At times, he does not hesitate to extend a fatwa on Islamic issues: He considers Iranian law as "fairly un-Islamic" because in article 20 the "constitution grants equality of rights among men and women" (p. 178).

Roy does not transliterate foreign words and does not use carefully such foreign words as *ulama*, the plural form of *'ālim* (scholar). He frequently uses "ulamas" in order to refer to traditional Muslim scholars. The book contains factual mistakes. The late Tijani Abu Jederi, a Sudanese national, is referred to as a Saudi national (p. 144), and two conflicting dates are given for the death of the late Ayatollah Shariat Madari of Iran—1986 (p. 173) and 1982 (p. 179).

In the end of his work, Roy summarizes the threat to Muslim society:

The culture that threatens Muslim society is neither Jewish nor Christian; it is a world culture of consumption and communication, a culture that is secular, atheist, and ultimately empty; it has no values or strategies, but it is already here, in the cassette and the transistor, present in the most remote village. (p. 203)

But at the same time he remarks that "(neofundamentalism) is founded on stated rejection of all Western values" (p. 202). If the culture that threatens Muslim society is ultimately empty and has no value, what is it that the so-called fundamentalists reject?

On another occasion, Roy blames Islamist intellectuals for perceiving Muslim history as if the ummah had no division and humanity had no unconscious. Yet, he observes that "neofundamentalist society does not represent hatred of the other, but rather hatred of oneself and of one's desires" (p. 199). Roy's complete silence about the Islamists' position on colonialism, foreign banks, night clubs, and pro-Western governments have led him to these ambiguous conclusions. But, to what extent do these institutions represent Western values? Why do Islamists oppose them? These questions deserve discussion. Interestingly enough, Roy does not see any similarity between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in their response to secular and atheist culture and provides no reason for this.

Roy has raised many important questions, such as the academic standard in universities in Muslim countries, the function of Islamic banks, and,

overall, the nature of the relationship among various civilizations in the contemporary world. In my opinion, discussion of some of these subjects could have provided an appropriate platform for interreligious or even intercivilizational dialogue. The subject matter of the book is interesting and timely but also deserves more serious and objective analysis.

Endnotes

1. In this connection, one remembers the court verdict by Butrus Ghali (grandfather of the present UN secretary general) in the famous Dinshawi case (1906), in which a number of Egyptian villagers were given death sentences and which sparked the Egyptian nationalist movement.

2. I am not aware of such a definition of Islamization by any group under discussion.

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